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Leadership and Legitimacy

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LEADERSHIP AND LEGITIMACY[1]

ABSTRACT

The article links leadership and legitimacy in globalizing business. It forwards a framework for analyzing how actors in organizations may build and maintain organizational legitimacy through different strategies. The discussion connects strategies for legitimizing organizational conduct across levels of analysis, highlighting the role of leadership in this process. The article builds on organizational discourse analysis to explain how individual actors may shape societal perceptions around organizational legitimacy. The presented framework highlights three generic strategies and the corresponding processes associated with leading toward legitimacy. In this way, it emphasizes mechanisms for gaining and maintaining legitimacy for each strategic response of the organization in relation to rhetorical tactics used to influence discourses and the resulting necessary leadership resources. The framework offers future theoretical and empirical research directions for the analysis of legitimacy discourses.

KEYWORDS

Discourse Analysis, Leadership, Legitimacy, Level of Analysis, Strategies

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LEADERSHIP AND LEGITIMACY

Leading toward organizational legitimacy has become one of the main challenges facing business firms in an increasingly complex, globalized world (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995). In order to gain and maintain organizational legitimacy, business leaders have to cope successfully with a growing pluralism and heterogeneity of expectations from internal and external stakeholders as well as resolve conflicting interests by addressing the relevant legitimacy discourses (Child & Rodrigues, 2011; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Monin, 2010). Organizational legitimacy, which can be understood as the social acceptance of organizations or organizational behavior (Suchman, 1995), is subjectively perceived and ascribed to organizations by processes of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and (re-)produced in discourses with organizational stakeholders and the broader public.

Research at the organizational level has acknowledged the need for addressing legitimacy issues in (global) business (see, e.g., Bitektine, 2011; Erkama & Vaara, 2010). Yet not much has been done to link the micro level of leadership to organizational legitimacy, as evident, for example, in the absence of organizational legitimacy as a topic in leadership research or in textbooks on leadership (e.g., Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2006) or the absence of leadership in the legitimacy literature—be it institutional, resource dependence, or discursive approaches addressing the topic, where agency is either referred to in terms of an organizational entity or subsumed under discursive processes (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011). This missing consideration of leadership in legitimizing organizational conduct in turn links into other calls for research to address issues of legitimacy (e.g., Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), discourse (e.g., Vaara & Tienari, 2008), and leadership (e.g., Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Moon, 2009; House & Aditya, 1997; Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006) more thoroughly across levels of analysis.

Apparently, leaders may contribute to organizational legitimacy by treating the various stakeholder claims in such a way that they gain and maintain positive evaluations of organizational conduct by the broader society (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Voegtlin, Patzer, & Scherer, 2012). The current article focuses on how leaders can do this. As organizational legitimacy can be regarded as an ongoing social construction manifested in (societal) discourses around organizational action or non-action (Vaara & Monin, 2010), this discussion draws on discourse analysis as the theoretical framework to bridge leadership action and organizational legitimacy (Hardy, 2001; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Phillips et al., 2004). Following up on this, "discourse analysis has proven a useful theoretical framework for understanding the social production of organizational and interorganizational phenomena" (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 636). It emphasizes the role of language and communication as constitutive for social reality. Leaders' actions are more likely than those of other employees to shape or influence discourses as they are regarded as legitimate actors, with the necessary resources and authority, who have the right to speak for their organization and who are centrally located within a social network (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 643). However, as leaders increasingly interact with external stakeholders, the notion of influence that was predominantly based on the resources associated with the higher hierarchical position of the leaders when dealing with their direct followers has to be reconsidered. In particular, the forms of influence upon which leaders can draw to influence discourses around organizational legitimacy need to be explained.

We therefore present a coherent framework that incorporates macro-level (organizational legitimacy as social attribution constructed in discourses with societal actors), meso-level (organizational sensemaking of and strategic response to legitimacy pressures), and micro-level aspects (leadership). The process of leading toward legitimacy will be illustrated alongside three generic types of legitimization strategies, which will offer a heuristic approach for future theoretical and empirical research. Our framework begins to explain mechanisms through which leadership may contribute to legitimacy discourses across levels of analysis. Thus, our main contribution stems from combining, for the first time, types and strategies of organizational legitimacy with a conceptual account of rhetorical tactics of influencing legitimacy discourses and a detailed depiction of leadership resources favorable for this process. This theoretical (re-)processing adds more depth and detail to the legitimization process. The purpose of the current article is to contribute first to the legitimacy discussion by adding the micro level of leadership and presenting strategies for gaining and maintaining organizational legitimacy through leadership agency, and second to the leadership discussion by highlighting the possible role of leadership in influencing legitimacy discourses.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical assumptions of discourse analysis. Second, following the structure of Figure 1, we discuss the legitimacy challenges facing global business organizations in interaction with society (macro level of analysis) (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). We highlight possible strategic responses of the organization. Third, on the meso level, we emphasize how organizational leaders perceive the societal pressures surrounding issues of legitimacy (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, 1995). In addition, we present rhetorical influence tactics as a way to translate leadership actions into a strategic response for the organization (Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Finally, on the micro level, we discuss the implications of individual agency, highlighting more clearly the role of leadership and its resources in this process (Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2004). We argue that leaders draw on certain resources and forms of communication at their disposal in order to influence specific legitimacy discourses (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION: THE UNDERLYING ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The underlying theoretical lens applied in this article to explain the process of leading toward legitimacy is organizational discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). "*Discourse* is defined as a system of texts that brings objects into being" (Hardy, 2001, p. 26). Individual actions generate texts, which can be "written or spoken language, cultural artifacts, and visual representations" (Hardy, 2001, p. 26). Bodies of texts on a certain topic shape the discourse around this topic. Phillips and colleagues (2004, p. 635) argue that "language is fundamental […] and it is through linguistic processes that definitions of reality are constituted." Similarly, the German philosopher Habermas assumes that society and social life constitutes itself in communication (Habermas, 1984; 1987).

Discursive approaches and their underlying theories and ontological assumptions have received increasing attention in the organizational and the management literature (see e.g., Fairclough, 1995; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008). Organizational discourse analysis has been used to study legitimization strategies both theoretically and empirically (see e.g., Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). In following an organizational discourse analysis approach, we also adopt the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions implied by this perspective (Grant, Iedema, & Oswick, 2009). That is, we draw on "social constructionism in its moderate form, which claims that meanings and knowledge are historically and culturally constructed in social processes and actions" (Siltaoja, 2009, p. 193); see also (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The ontological nature is concerned with the essence of the phenomena under investigation.

We are referring to a view on reality that is not objectively observable in its totality, but to a great extent a social construction of individuals that creates and shares meaning through communicative exchanges. The epistemological stance of discourse analysis, which entails assumptions about the grounds of knowledge, would rely on knowledge that can be objectified to some extent in the form of texts enduring in discourses around legitimacy (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 1; Grant et al., 2009). Although the historical and cultural contingency of social practices constrain agency, a moderate form of social constructionism enables us to emphasize the still important role of social or structural change through individual leadership actions (Giddens, 1984; see also, Whittington, 2010).

Organizational discourse analysis, through its understanding of language and communication as an essential part and constitutional of social reality, offers an ideal starting point for analyzing how legitimacy of an organization is shaped through discourses in society and organizations. It further allows us to examine discursive strategies as a means to pursue the strategic response of an organization toward perceived legitimacy pressures as "the management of legitimacy depends on communication as actors instrumentally deploy evocative symbols to garner legitimacy" (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 642). In our context, discourse analysis is a way to frame and analyze the link between individual agency (leadership actions) and organizational level outcomes (Phillips et al., 2004).

In the following, we distinguish among discourses around legitimacy, rhetorical influence tactics, and forms of communication. Whereas discourses are regarded as the summary of communicative processes that may lead to an attribution of legitimacy, rhetorical tactics have a strategic intent. These tactics comprise sets of arguments leaders can draw upon with the purpose of influencing legitimacy perceptions of societal actors. Finally, the forms of communication represent the way in which the arguments are brought forward—namely, the way in which the rhetoric is wrapped up (for example, written or verbal accounts). By adopting this as our starting point for analyzing processes of organizational legitimization, we can now turn to the implications of this view according to the level of analysis we are observing, beginning with the macro level.

MACRO LEVEL: THE LEGITIMACY CHALLENGE OF GLOBAL BUSINESS

Organizational legitimacy is the general perception that the organization performs and acts in a way that is desirable, proper, or appropriate according to the social system (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Accordingly, "legitimacy is socially constructed in that it reflects a congruence between the behaviors of the legitimated entity and the shared (or assumedly shared) beliefs of some social group" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Thus, for organizations and their individual agents, it is important to sense their own social perception in order to gain or maintain legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011; Golant & Sillince, 2007). From a discursive perspective, legitimacy is viewed as an ongoing discursive struggle evolving around broader social practices (Vaara & Tienari, 2008).

Within the existing literature, legitimacy has received significant attention from many different fields of research, including institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995), resource dependence theory (Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), organizational ecology (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Hannan & Carroll, 1992; Singh, Tucker, & House, 1986), and critical management theory (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2011). For our purposes, we adopt Suchman's distinction of three different types of legitimacy, each with its own dynamic (in terms of stakeholder action and reaction) and thus different implications for the organizational response to legitimacy issues (Suchman, 1995). The first type of legitimacy is *cognitive legitimacy*, which is based on taken-for-grantedness and on comprehensibility. Legitimacy according to this view is built upon cultural models that provide systematization in a chaotic cognitive environment and thus function as an explanation for organizational actions. It is based on cognition (even tradition), which makes it more difficult to influence as it evolves over time within society.

Pragmatic legitimacy results from the organizations' most immediate and self-interested stakeholders. It involves direct exchanges between the organization and stakeholders, but it can also involve broader political, economic, or social interrelations. Pragmatic legitimacy is maintained as long as constituencies perceive that they benefit from the organization and its behavior or outcome. Such a preference-based view of legitimacy can be modified by indirect influences, such as organizational responsiveness to larger interests of the stakeholder, or by personal dispositions, making one organization more preferable and thus more legitimate than another (Suchman, 1995, p. 578).

Finally, *moral legitimacy* reflects a positive normative evaluation of organizational activities. It is a judgment of whether an organizational activity was the right thing to do instead of whether the activity was profitable. It is more resistant to self-interested manipulation because it is embedded in an explicit public discussion by giving and considering reasons to justify certain actions (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995, p. 576). Moral legitimacy thus differs from narrow-self interest, instead reflecting what Suchman describes as "a prosocial logic" (Suchman, 1995, p. 579).

This multiplicity of types induces the need for concrete strategic actions to maintain, gain, or rebuild legitimacy. Corporations can maintain their legitimacy by meeting the expectations of their societal environment and through compliance to law and social rules (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Friedman, 1970; Sundaram & Inkpen, 2004). As soon as these organizational routines fail or break, legitimacy is in danger of being questioned and—in the worst case—breaking down (e.g., when the search for profit leads to a breach with social norms or legal regulations). By then, the organization has to engage in strategies to rebuild or repair—or at least adjust to—the legitimacy expectations of its environment. Common strategic responses are either passive by reacting to the expectations of the environment (*isomorphic adaptation*, which is primarily addressing cognitive legitimacy) or active by influencing or manipulating the perceptions and normative demands of the organization's environment to reach acceptance of the organizational practices (*strategic manipulation*, which is primarily addressing pragmatic legitimacy) (Scherer et al., 2011). The choice of these strategies is regarded to be influenced by two major factors (Scherer et al., 2011): first, organizational costs of managing legitimacy and changing organizational structure and processes (costs of change), and second, consistency of societal expectation. The latter implies that, when discourses around an issue of legitimacy are not clear or coherent, the organizational action regarding definitions of unacceptable action is more negotiable (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 645). Both factors are in turn decisive when choosing the legitimacy strategy. Low costs of change and a highly consistent environment warrant a passive strategy of isomorphic adaptation while high organizational costs of change and a low level of consistency call for an active form of strategic manipulation (Scherer et al., 2011).

In times of globalization, societal expectations are seldom consistent, and organizations are confronted with complexity. Often the country of organizational decision making differs from the country in which the societal reactions to organizational decisions are sensed or critiqued. The diverse cultural context of globally acting organizations constitutes different sets of values, social expectations, and stakeholder claims. The cultural heterogeneity of social communities is fostered by processes of mitigation and individualization (Beck, 2000; Beck-Gernsheim & Beck, 2002), which in turn makes it difficult for organizations to maintain their legitimacy based on taken-for-granted assumptions and requires shifts in their strategic orientation. New strategies must integrate the capability of the organization to engage in social learning and in a process of mutual adaptation. To address this strategic need, Palazzo and Scherer (2006) suggested that organizations actively engage in *moral reasoning* as a third strategy, which is a vital function for moral legitimacy (see, Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2011).

Leadership can now set the agenda for and subsequently facilitate the strategic response of the organization by choosing to resort to isomorphic adaption, strategic manipulation or moral reasoning, thereby deploying different rhetorical tactics to influence the societal discourse.

MESO LEVEL: SENSEMAKING AND RHETORICAL INFLUENCE TACTICS

The meso-level investigation includes how societal pressures around issues of legitimacy are perceived by organizational members, relating to processes of sensemaking (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, 1995); it further comprises the strategic response of the organization toward the perceived external environmental pressures. We focus on rhetorical influence tactics as a means of determining how leadership can affect legitimacy discourses in society.

Sensemaking of legitimacy pressures: Leaders as gatekeepers

Legitimacy is ascribed to an organization by its surrounding environment (Bitektine, 2011). Sensemaking, in turn, is the process by which organizational actors perceive the external pressure to justify their actions or behaviors. A general understanding of sensemaking describes the process as placing stimuli in some kind of framework or developing cognitive maps of the environment (Basu & Palazzo, 2008, p. 123; Weick, 1995, p. 4). The cognitive maps and shared representations of the environment as perceived by organizational members influence how issues of legitimacy become apparent (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1995). They can affect, for example, to what extent relevant information about legitimacy pressures are gathered, if the organization recognizes the pressure in time, and if it is even recognized as an issue that is important for the organization (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, 1995).

Leaders play an important role in this process, as they are the intermediary persons that interact with both external and internal stakeholders (Schneider, 2002). As such, they can be regarded as gatekeepers between the demands of organizations' environment and the internal requirements. External stakeholders regard leaders as focal persons to whom their concerns can be addressed as leaders have the authority to speak for their organization (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Phillips et al., 2004); internally, employees expect leaders to make sense of external environmental pressures and provide direction and guidance (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Neuberger, 2002).

Therefore, in order to choose the right strategy to respond to environmental legitimacy pressures, organizational leaders first have to make sense of these pressures, which can be facilitated by active and ongoing stakeholder dialogues. For example, when Greenpeace accused Nestle of depleting rainforest for palm oil plantations (see e.g., Greenpeace, 2012), the issue of investing money in palm oil became an issue even for banks investing money in palm oil (*The New York Times*, 2010). The question is how a bank can perceive (i.e., make sense of) the potential threat to its legitimacy triggered by its investment strategy, as this is an issue where banks are not directly involved, not even through a possible responsibility for third parties along the value chain. One way to enhance the awareness of legitimacy issues and in turn trigger sensemaking processes within the organization is to gather the relevant information in due time, which could be facilitated by, for example, creating a department for sustainability affairs or reputational risk management where the organization gathers information through third parties specializing in estimating reputational risks of societal issues or cooperating more closely with the relevant NGOs. Leadership would start here with the CEO's or top-management team's recognition that a need exists for a structural differentiation to facilitate sensemaking of sustainability-related risks by creating specialized departments. Focal persons within these departments would subsequently gather the relevant information from external stakeholders, filter it, and translate it internally into recommendations for adequate responses.

Rhetorical influence tactics leaders can use

Scholars have identified different rhetorical tactics[i] used intentionally or unintentionally to legitimize an issue or an action through discourse (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Vaara and Tienari (2008), drawing on van Leeuwen's work on the 'grammar of legitimation' (see therefore e.g., van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), identify four broader categories of semantic-functional legitimating strategies: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis.[ii]

Authorization is legitimization by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, or persons regarded as authorities. *Rationalization* draws on utility considerations and knowledge claims (e.g., emphasizing the utility of a new technology for others by drawing on scientific results or referencing experts). *Moral evaluation* is based on the reference to existing norms and value systems. Finally, *mythopoesis* draws on narratives to exemplify through stories how the issue of legitimacy is related to the past and future (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). These categories include a number of subtypes and are not mutually exclusive; in other words, actors often draw on multiple tactics simultaneously to legitimize their actions. Using multiple tactics is often seen as the most effective form (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). However, we argue that the three rhetorical tactics of authorization, rationalization, and moral evaluation can be regarded as generic in influencing organizational legitimacy discourses as each tactic can be related to a specific type of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995)[iii].

The rhetorical influence tactics can be seen as communicative arguments that leaders can refer to in order to pursue a certain legitimization strategy. Accordingly, organizational leaders can initially gain and maintain legitimacy by trying to influence discourses through the tactic of authorization (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Authorization tries to appeal to the cognitive legitimacy of taken-for-granted societal views as related to the isomorphic adaption strategy. It is a rhetorical reference to an institutionalized authority—be it a traditional or legal form of authority or the authority of societal expectations (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Thus, leaders can justify organizational actions by complying with the law, adhering to local customs and traditions, or referring to formal (state) authorities (Bitektine, 2011).

In times of crises—namely, when the cognitive legitimacy around an issue is eroding—the bases for authorization may also cease to exist as the way things were done according to custom or tradition are no longer a shared basis of social expectations (Habermas, 2001). However, if the societal pressure exerted on the organization to comply with certain expectations (e.g., no sweatshops) is coherent and costs of change are low, organizational leaders will strategically adapt to the isomorphic pressures, justifying their conduct through authorization, as in the example of the German energy sector, where abolishing nuclear energy became almost a take-for-granted view within the society after the Fukushima incident. Energy companies complied with societal pressures by referring to the authority of governmental regulation, thereby accepting the exit from nuclear energy.

Second, rationalization parallels the legitimization strategy of strategic manipulation (Suchman, 1995; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Rationalization can be seen as reference to the utility or (theoretical) relevance of the services or products organizations offer or the way they operate (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). The aim of this tactic is the purposeful persuasion of selective audiences. Organizational actors produce texts to convince those who are questioning the legitimacy of their actions by emphasizing the utility of these actions or referring to scientific knowledge and findings around the issues (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). This approach is most effective if societal pressures are inconsistent and the costs of organizational change are high (Scherer et al., 2011). In this case, those stakeholders that exert pressure on the firm can be targeted and addressed directly by organizational leaders. Rationalization includes, for example, addressing the NGOs that question the company's actions directly by presenting corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports or scientific results of ecological sustainability measures undertaken as well as lobbying or public relations arrangements to affect customers' perceptions.

Finally, moral evaluation can be seen as part of a moral reasoning strategy. Evaluating an issue according to social norms, moral values, or ethical principles may enable leaders to convince stakeholders of the moral legitimacy of organizational conduct (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Arguments exchanged through dialogue with the affected stakeholders are a form of communication suitable to this strategy. Successful moral reasoning includes deliberation, which means taking part in processes of public will formation (Habermas, 1998; 2001). This tactic can be successfully initiated by establishing an ongoing stakeholder dialogue around a controversial issue, such as a dialogue about the scope of responsibility for working conditions of a company's suppliers.

Globalization has impacted how these strategies can be used to legitimize organizational actions or behavior (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). The process of globalization affects the possibilities for authorization in that it erodes traditions and customs, as migration, import and export of cultural goods, mass consumerism, and mass communication move societies toward societies of individuals with culturally heterogeneous backgrounds (Habermas, 2001; Scherer & Palazzo, 2008). We argue that rationalization becomes a dominant strategy, especially when justifying the use of new technologies, processes, or other inventions. Organizations rely on experts and scientific results in the form of the quantitative data of areas concerning natural sciences (e.g., testing the effectiveness of new technologies) as well as concerning social sciences (e.g., presenting results of surveys conducted on specific topics). However, the effectiveness of this strategy is in so far limited as it is often directed toward a specific stakeholder group, trying to manipulate their estimation or trying to persuade them (Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). On the one hand, this leaves out other potentially influential stakeholder groups; on the other hand, such a strategy is only partially able to reconcile different worldviews or culturally heterogeneous beliefs. Finally, moral evaluation can be seen as a means to convince others of the moral or ethical legitimacy of an issue by the force of the better argument (Habermas, 1996) through public discourses. As shared bases of values, norms, or customs are eroding, the need for organizations to justify their behavior by persuading different stakeholder groups through dialogue of one's arguments becomes increasingly important (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

As mentioned in the first section, the semantic strategy of authorization is primarily relevant in terms of maintaining legitimacy, while rationalization and moral evaluation seem to become dominant in order to gain or rebuild legitimacy after a crisis. Leadership is the link between these tactics and their potential for affecting legitimacy discourses, as leaders are the dominant organizational actors that may influence these discourses (Phillips et al., 2004). We will now turn to analyze why they are such dominant actors and how they can exert influence.

MICRO LEVEL: LEADERSHIP RESOURCES AND INFLUENCE

At the micro level, we delineate concrete leadership actions according to Suchman's three types of legitimacy. Such actions relate to specific verbal explanations and justification of leadership behavior, especially through the production of texts, which are symbolic expressions of individuals that are accessible to others (Phillips et al., 2004). Philipps et al. (2004, p. 634), focusing primarily on institutional actors, proposed that "texts that are produced by actors who are understood to have a legitimate right to speak, who have resource of power or formal authority, or who are centrally located in a field are more likely to become embedded in discourse than texts that are not.” We argue that leaders in organizations are actors in this sense; thus, we elaborate in greater detail how they can shape discourses.

The primary understanding of mainstream psychological leadership approaches rests on the influence process: “Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2006, p. 8). Discursive leadership approaches, building on a social constructionist ontology and epistemology (Fairhurst, 2009), predominantly understand leadership as the management of meaning (Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Podolny et al., 2004). The influence leaders exert is enacted through processes of communication with the leaders’ addresses. Management of meaning relates to the process of sensegiving and can be regarded as a means to shape organizational practices and discourses—that is, affecting how reality is perceived by organizational members. Sensegiving is defined as the “process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) proposed that leaders have a certain sensegiving capacity that consists of issue-related expertise and issue-related organizational performance. Both Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) and Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) have discussed leader sensegiving in terms of influencing organizational stakeholders, especially under the condition of complex environments where “leaders sought to construct stories that could make sense of unpredictable, ambiguous issues for stakeholder groups with divergent interests” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 77). Stakeholders in turn, “commonly expect leaders to fulfill the main sensegiving roles in organizations” (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 77).

Leadership resources

A moderate social constructivist ontology allows actors to play an active part in shaping meaning, discourses, and subsequently reality (Bordieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). We want to highlight the resources leaders can mobilize to influence discourses. According to Bordieu (1977; 2005), actors possess capital and habitus, which they can in turn use to shape or influence practices. *Habitus* specifies the durable dispositions and beliefs of an individual. These are attributes of the character of a person that are shaped over time by the social environmental influences and the experiences of a person (e.g., also their ability to communicate and exchange arguments). *Capital* refers to the resources individuals can draw upon to affirm, maintain, or expand their position in the relevant field:

> "Within a company as a field (Bordieu, 2005), the capital of individuals as agents can be analysed in terms of bureaucratic capital (linked to responsibilities, action domain, hierarchical level and seniority); financial capital (the control of direct and indirect financial resources that agents can mobilize through their budget); technological capital (possessing expertise or a specific skill); organizational capital (the capacity to master procedures and formal rules); social capital (involvement in networks); and informational capital (privileged access to knowledge)" (Gomez, 2010, pp. 143-144).

The more capital a person is able to mobilize, the more possibilities this person has to act effectively. When individuals mobilize their capital and simultaneously draw on their body of experience, it can lead to actions that change the structural properties within the field and influence legitimacy discourses.

Leaders are likely to possess an alleviated access to the organizational capital (Neuberger, 2002), which offers them enhanced possibilities for individual agency and decision-making and may in turn affect organizations' structural conditions. In addition, their personal development (habitus), formed by their social environment, education, and professional experience, may provide them with an extended scope for action, such as through knowledge acquired by higher education or the social network they have built up during this time and the time spent working on their profession. Due to the easier possibilities to accumulate organizational capital and the presumably advantageous predispositions (habitus), leaders have an enhanced scope for action that can ultimately bring forth or shape organizational legitimacy strategies. This further relates to their sensegiving capacity of issue-related expertise and performance (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007); for example, prior experiences and knowledge as an expert (habitus) and the favorable access to the organizations resources (capital) can enhance leaders' sensegiving capacity.

Forms of communication

In addition to resources, individual agents in organizations can make use of different forms of communication to affect legitimacy perceptions of the surrounding environment. These forms of communication can be seen as texts that influence discourses related to issues of legitimacy (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 636). They represent the way in which rhetorical tactics are enacted (i.e., the way the arguments are brought forward). Leaders can choose to resort to verbal expression, written accounts, or artifacts to deliver their message.

Hardy et al. (2005) identified styles of talk that affect conversations, focusing on patterns in tone, style, and rhythm as well as the format of conversations. These styles of talk affect the motivational conditions of the recipients, influencing how the (rational) arguments brought forward are perceived. Thus, they provide the emotional energy for persuasion (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005, pp. 68-69). They can be distinguished into two exemplary styles of talk: cooperative or assertive talk. Cooperative talk is the willingness to consider and take into account other positions whereas assertive talk aims to emphasize one's own view and position. Hardy and colleagues (2005) argue that both styles are important for effective collaboration to occur.

The forms of communication help explain how organizational constituencies can be approached by business leaders. In terms of affecting legitimacy discourses, on one hand this is a question of how organizational leaders engage their external stakeholders (e.g., do leaders just inform their stakeholders or are they aiming for an active dialogue); on the other hand, it refers to how they get commitment from their internal audiences. Morsig and Schultz (2006) identified three ideal types of external stakeholder engagement through communication: a one-way approach of stakeholder information, a two-way asymmetric stakeholder response format, and a two-way symmetric stakeholder involvement. The one-way information strategy relies on issuing information to inform organizational constituencies (objectively) about topics of public interest affected by organizational conduct (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). The affected stakeholder groups can either support or oppose these issues, but there is no direct exchange between the parties. The two-way asymmetric approach assumes that a corporation engages more actively with stakeholders, yet with a dominance of communication efforts from the side of the corporation as “management will champion and ‘give sense’ to its decisions” to influence organizational stakeholders (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 327). Forms of asymmetric dialogue with the public include market polls or opinion surveys as well as organizational responses in the form of feedback and public relation endeavors (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Finally, the symmetric stakeholder involvement approach presupposes an active and institutionalized two-way dialogue with external stakeholders “in which the primary aim is to bring about mutual understanding, rational agreement or consent” (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 328).

With regard to the internal communication with employees, leaders can also choose different approaches. In the leadership literature, monologic and dialogic forms of employee involvement are discussed under authoritative and participative leadership styles with the aim of committing employees to achieve organizational goals through differing degrees of employee involvement in decision-making processes (Yukl, 2006).

Thus, the types of communication can be seen as a continuum from monologic forms of engagement toward an ideal dialogic form of mutual exchange. Applied to the process of leading toward legitimacy, we distinguish between rather monologic and assertive forms of communication, resulting in texts that, for example, take the form of written reports, advertisements, instructions or directions, and rather dialogic and cooperative forms of communication, involving predominantly spoken forms of text, including interactive exchanges via new electronic media channels (e.g., Twitter or Facebook).

Leadership as an influence process: The management of meaning

Leaders can draw upon their resources and the forms of communication to foster agency that affects discourses of legitimacy. Yet what is missing in the equation is the concrete influence tactic used for this purpose. We identified several influence tactics—namely, the rhetorical tactics of authorization, rationalization, and moral evaluation, depending on the legitimacy strategy leaders want to pursue (i.e., isomorphic adaption, strategic manipulation, or moral reasoning). We then connected individual leadership action to organizational-level legitimization strategies (see Table 1).

Leadership as an influence process enacted through communication and relying on leaders' resources is an essential component of managing meaning around issues of legitimacy. This idea relates to the general understanding of leadership as an influence process in mainstream leadership research (Bass, 1990; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2006). Business leaders who want to foster collective action, promote change, or manipulate legitimacy perceptions can draw on the organizational capital at their disposal and their personal dispositions and experiences (habitus) (Bordieu, 1977; Gomez, 2010) as well as resort to specific forms of communication (i.e., verbal, written or symbolic communication; cooperative or assertive talk) (Hardy et al., 2005) to address the targeted stakeholder groups. In this way, they produce monologic or dialogic forms of texts that can influence discourses (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Done purposely in order to gain or maintain organizational legitimacy, they may choose a rhetorical influence tactic corresponding to the perceived legitimacy at stake (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

For instance, a managing director of the marketing department who launches a PR campaign in order to enhance or rebuild the reputation of a brand tries to strategically manipulate legitimacy perceptions around the organization's products. The manager draws on the resources of the marketing department to initiate the campaign. The forms of communication will be rather monologic through advertisements or PR statements, displayed through multimedia channels. The implicit tactic could be based on rationalizing the usefulness and quality of the product brand. In this way, the manager tries to shape the discourse and meaning around the contested brand. Another example is leadership by representatives of a CSR department who initiate and institutionalize an ongoing stakeholder dialogue with the most dominant NGOs in the respective area in which the organization is involved. Such an ongoing dialogue may shape sensemaking processes around issues of CSR between the participants of the dialogue. Furthermore, given that the results of the dialogue are distributed within the organization, this could affect sensemaking processes among employees within the organization (Basu & Palazzo, 2008), facilitated by the management of meaning of the leading actors (Fairhurst, 2009). Internal sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) may occur very gradually and through subtle forms of influence, such as when enhanced awareness of the environmental impact of what the organization does is recognized by focal persons within the organization and transferred to others through the symbolic actions of those persons often regarded as role models (e.g., simple symbolic actions aimed at protecting the environment, like using public transportation to go to work or printing on both sides of a page; the dress code implicitly requested to present the organization as credible and trustworthy to its customers).

In an attempt to summarize these processes, we therefore arrive at the following understanding of leadership: Leaders as managers of meaning draw first on their resources (habitus and capital) and second on forms of communication (texts) in order to influence (through rhetorical tactics) the meaning around specific discourses. If we exemplify this understanding of leadership alongside the three types of legitimacy distinguished by Suchman (1995), we can provide a heuristic approach for the three strategies of leading toward legitimacy (Table 1). These three types are presented here in a generic form and, as such, shall offer guidance for theoretical and empirical research.

Insert Table 1 about here

LEADING TOWARD LEGITIMACY ACROSS LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

In this section, we exemplify our understanding of leadership across levels of analysis as reflected in the previously discussed definition (see also Table 1 and Figure 1). Choosing an influence tactic to push action toward a certain legitimacy strategy involves a decision from the respective leader based on what leaders perceive to be at stake in terms of legitimacy. In other words, leaders have to make sense of external pressures on legitimacy (Weick, 1995). The difficulty here is that organizational members react to what they perceive as legitimacy pressures from their environment, which is constrained by prevailing cognitive maps and practices in an organization (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Weick, 1995). One way to alleviate sensemaking processes is to gather the relevant information from the organizational environment in a timely manner, such as by creating specific departments (e.g., CSR departments) or encouraging dialogues with the relevant stakeholder groups.

Societal pressures on organizational legitimacy can revolve around cognitive, pragmatic, or moral legitimacy. If leaders as gatekeepers perceive pressure to either of these types of legitimacy, they are likely to resort to the respective legitimization strategy of isomorphic adaption, strategic manipulation, or moral reasoning, depending on the coherence of the perceived pressures and the costs of organizational change (Scherer et al., 2011). This may not be a conscious decision to secure legitimacy; rather, it can be assumed that leaders react to external pressures according to what they perceive to be at stake (societal pressures) and what the possibilities of organizational responses are (costs of change).

As a result, leaders may choose the respective influence tactic to affect the discourse (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). If societal pressure is perceived as coherent and firms decide to react by adapting to these expectations, leaders will more likely try to influence discourses by issuing texts that refer to the authority of what is perceived as being taken for granted (i.e., authorization). Rationalization is more likely to be effective when trying to persuade the relevant stakeholder groups directly. Moral evaluation becomes relevant when organizations are confronted with competing expectations, customs, or norms (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

Leaders can draw on their resources and the specific forms of communication to pursue the chosen influence tactic. Discursive leadership regards leaders as change agents who help create context in organizations (Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Leaders can foster collective action in organizations in which they produce texts that others will have to pick up, relate to, or react to. Leadership influence becomes manifest in, for example, agenda setting, delegating, communicating (through their social network), or effective role modeling as well as by interacting with others by trying to persuade, convince, coerce, instruct, command, or manipulate others (Fairhurst, 2009; Yukl, 2006). Leadership capital and habitus (Bordieu, 1977; Gomez, 2010) put them in a privileged position to foster change and provide sense to others regarding what they did or want to do. Thus, leaders can more likely influence which discourse an organization focuses upon and in which way the response will be carried out.

Leading toward cognitive legitimacy

Isomorphic adaption to external societal pressures can be fostered and legitimized by resorting to the rhetoric of authorization. The form of communication that becomes relevant here is more likely monologic and cooperative, with an emphasis on symbolic texts—namely, leaders show through direct action that they try to change the course of their organization to adapt to the demanded pressures. Advantageous predispositions of leaders may be a deeper knowledge of customs, norms, and expectations of the society that is questioning the organizational legitimacy. Prevalent forms of capital to foster adaption and convince stakeholders through authorization should be bureaucratic (e.g., a certain level of seniority) or organizational (mastery of procedures and rules) (see Table 1).

Examples can be found in isomorphic pressures within an industry to comply with societal expectations "as soon as a major actor or at least a few actors in an industry take such steps" (Scherer et al., 2011, p. 21), as in the example of Nike disclosing the names of its supply chain partners and the subsequent adaptation to the new standard of transparency by Adidas and Puma a few years later (Scherer et al., 2011). Another example is what its CEO called in an HBR article the "greening of Petrobas," the proclaimed green turnaround of a Brazilian energy and oil company (De Azevedo, 2009). After several severe accidents with negative consequences for the health of employees, the environment, and costs to the company, the pressure on Petrobas to improve its environmental performance and safety for its employees became a consistent societal demand that was further amplified by its transformation from a state-owned company to a quasi-governmental organization listed on the Bovespa and the New York Stock Exchange, resulting in scrutiny from its shareholders as well as an increased need for transparency. The leadership of Petrobas decided to comply with the legitimacy pressures by launching an encompassing environmental and operational safety program (De Azevedo, 2009). The CEO, who sees himself as the steward of the new culture at Petrobas, seems to have the capital and habitus to justify and accelerate the change (Gomez, 2010). As the CEO, he has access to different forms of organizational capital to foster change, such as by giving sense to the environmental turnaround (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011) or making health and security the top priority of the organizational agenda. According to one article, his favorable habitus may stem from his time as a prominent activist in Brazil's student movement, his involvement in the founding of the Worker's Party, and his connections to the former president Lula da Silva (De Azevedo, 2009, p. 44). These aspects of the CEO's vita add to the credibility of the social responsibility initiatives of the company, underscore his familiarity with the actual Brazil's society, and provide him with a favorable social network.

Leading toward pragmatic legitimacy

Strategic manipulation to gain, maintain, or rebuild favorable stakeholder reactions can be achieved by rationalizing organizational conduct. The forms of communication chosen for this strategy are dominated by monologic and assertive forms of texts (Hardy et al., 2005; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), such as publishing public relations statements, scientific results and analyses, or lobbying with the most immediate and powerful stakeholders. They are therefore most often presented as a finalized written report or summary that does not invite any immediate response or dialogue. Leaders draw on the technological knowledge resources of their organization for the expertise or the financial resources to fund public relations campaigns, making a broader social network helpful for lobbying activities (see Table 1).

The process can be exemplified along the aspects indentified in Table 1. One example is the new foods containing elements of genetically modified ingredients. A company that wants to issue such a food product may face legitimacy pressures from customer groups demanding natural and healthy food, governmental agencies responsible for allowing new food products, and NGOs like Foodwatch. Yet the societal pressure may not be consistent. Therefore, the leadership responsible for the product—namely, those that shape meaning around these issues (including top management, research and development representatives, and product managers)—will most likely resort to a strategy of strategic manipulation as the costs of organizational change (in this case, the cost for research and development of the product) were presumably very high. They will try to manipulate (convince) those stakeholder groups who are the most relevant and powerful in this case (e.g., government, consumers, NGOs). The tactic to influence the public discourse may be based predominantly on rationalization (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) through the issuing of scientific reports to convince the audience that the product has no health risks, resorting to lobbying, or persuading consumers via public relations and advertising. The relevant capital sources include access to financial resources for the marketing department, technological expertise for generating scientific reports, and a strong social network for lobbying activities. The form of communication would be monologic, consisting predominantly of written reports (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Leading toward moral legitimacy

As the need for organizations to justify their behavior by persuading different stakeholder groups through a dialogue presenting their arguments becomes increasingly important in times of globalization (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), the strategic response of moral evaluation and reasoning to secure legitimacy becomes vital. Leaders can influence the discourse around organizational (mis-)conduct by morally evaluating their actions. As a result, the form of communication is most likely a dialogue with the respective stakeholder groups, often including NGOs, government officials, or international organizations (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) with an intention for cooperation (Hardy et al., 2005). The exchange is often done verbally or through media channels that allow for a higher frequency of interaction. Effective sources of power for this strategy may comprise informational capital (i.e., privileged access to knowledge) as well as social capital (i.e., close and trustful relationships with the relevant stakeholders). A beneficial habitus for leaders would include learned communication and rhetorical skills as well as an open and ethical mindset (see Table 1).

Ongoing moral argumentation implies that leaders engage in processes of public discourses (Bohmann & Rehg, 1997; Habermas, 2001). In other words, they participate in processes of public will formation by ethically justifying their behavior or actions or aiming for higher standards and regulations. Successfully engaging in processes of public discourses requires leaders to predict the consequences of their conduct for potentially affected stakeholder groups, invite them to participate in the discussion, encourage consensual solutions, and foster the public exchange of opinions (Bohmann & Rehg, 1997; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Furthermore, leaders must offer parties affected by organizational conduct the possibility to enter the discourse and try to establish institutional modes of communication with stakeholders and the public. Encouraging exchanges with stakeholders can in turn foster transparency of organizational actions, thereby making organizational actions comprehensible and traceable for stakeholders (Maak, 2007; Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Here we emphasize the strategy of moral evaluation, as we agree with the assumption of Scherer and colleagues (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer et al., 2011) that securing or rebuilding the moral legitimacy becomes more important as the process globalization enhances the heterogeneity of norms and regulations and the relational complexity of leadership in exchanges with stakeholders (Child & Rodrigues, 2011). Leaders should be in an advantageous position to perceive environmental pressures on organizational legitimacy when they show concern for consequences and subsequently engage with the possibly affected stakeholder (Maak, 2007). An active stakeholder dialogue enhances the possibility of identifying the right triggers from the environment, helping to match the actual expectations of societal actors with what is received as expectations by organizational actors and therefore foster sensemaking processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). It is also helpful for receiving information in a timely manner.

In sum, either of the strategies pursued by organizational leaders will link back to perceptions of organizational conduct by societal actors. External constituencies—namely, the media and the broader society—receive the responses to legitimacy pressures of an organization and then make sense of the perceived organizational endeavors to legitimize its behavior. They ultimately decide whether to ascribe legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011).

Limitations of the model

The process of leading toward legitimacy has been demonstrated using three generic types of legitimization strategies. These shall offer a heuristic approach for future theoretical and empirical research. We acknowledge that we tried to cover a complex topic, including different levels of analysis, at the expense of some details. While presenting a coherent overview of leading toward legitimacy, certain aspects at each level of analysis were not fully addressed within our conceptualization. However, the empirical examples throughout the paper point to the relevance of tackling this complex issue. As the model is intended as a starting point for future research investigating individual agency and legitimacy perceptions, we would like to encourage others to complete the picture. We therefore suggest a research agenda in the remaining part of the paper.

Furthermore, we have presented a heuristic approach alongside three generic strategies (Table 1). Empirical research may discover no such clear-cut strategy. The distinction of the strategies was intended to show an ideal approach to legitimize organizational actions and guide future research in categorizing empirical findings according to underlying legitimacy strategies, tactics, or leadership resources. Thus, there may be no single best way approach to legitimacy or—under extreme conditions of dynamism and complexity—not even a contingent answer according to the situation an organization is facing (Scherer et al., 2011). Rather, several strategies may need to be accommodated at the same time, addressing structural differentiation and individual capabilities to successfully handle these (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micoletta, & Loundbury, 2011; Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011).

Finally, this discussion may overemphasize leaders. We think this is relevant to show the potential of individual actors to shape legitimacy discourses and foster change through an active management of meaning. However, leaders may not be the only dominant influence in legitimacy discourses; rather, they can be regarded as central nodes in the discursive process around an issue shaped by many different actors and evolving over time.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

An approach that puts leadership in the center of attention of organizational legitimacy is timely and needed. The growing pressure from NGOs to consider the impact of organizational conduct for society and the environment has triggered organizational practices dealing with social responsibility or sustainability (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Multinational corporations, acting throughout the world under very different or even competing legal frameworks, cultural norms and values, and perceptions of what is right or wrong, find it increasingly difficult to comply with taken-for-granted assumptions (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Consequently, organizations often proactively engage in justifying their conduct in order to maintain their legitimacy (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

We have tried to demonstrate in this discussion what strategies organizations can use to build and maintain their legitimacy, what role discourses play in this process, and what part business leaders may adopt in legitimizing organizational conduct. We have thus presented a framework of organizational legitimization strategies across levels of analysis (see Figure 1 and Table 1). The main contribution of the article is to highlight the interplay between the types of organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), the corresponding strategic response of the organization enacted through rhetorical influence tactics (Vaara & Tienari, 2008; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), and the detailed depiction of relevant leadership resources (e.g., Gomez, 2010; Hardy et al., 2005; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). We identified those conditions or aspects at each level of analysis most likely to add to the ascription of a certain type of organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). This theoretical account of generic legitimization processes adds more depth and detail to the process while simultaneously providing a holistic overview of the interplay among the different levels of analysis. It offers a heuristic approach, understood as the use of mental shortcuts to help reduce complexity in decision making (Haack & Scherer, 2010; Kahneman, 2011) and in analyzing legitimization processes.

We further emphasize leadership. Leadership was proposed as a process to facilitate the management of meaning (Fairhurst, 2009; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) in legitimacy discourses as leaders serve as gatekeepers making sense of environmental legitimacy pressures by gathering the relevant information, provide employees with guidance and direction in relation to these pressures, and translate the environmental triggers into an organizational response. Leaders can facilitate the organization’s strategic response by relying on their resources (habitus and capital; Bordieu, 1977; Gomez, 2010) and specific forms of communication, reflecting the continuum from monologic to dialogic accounts (Hardy et al., 2005; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Theoretical implications

Macro level and organizational legitimacy. Whereas research around organizational legitimacy has focused predominantly on the macro level (i.e., gaining and maintaining legitimacy in an institutional environment) (Phillips et al., 2004; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), the current paper highlights the role of individual agency in processes of legitimization. The framework developed can help scholars in this field explain why certain organizations do not react the way they should according to institutional pressures. For example, a firm may not comply to isomorphic adaptations within an industry (e.g., a new environmental standard) due to its inability to make sense of the legitimacy pressure as it does not gather the relevant information in a timely manner or the agents of the firm do not perceive the information as relevant (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). Another reason may be that leadership of the organization chooses a different strategy to answer the perceived threat, such as trying to manipulate the most powerful stakeholders or convince organizational constituencies based on moral reasons. Finally, leadership may not be able to successfully influence the legitimacy discourse due to a lack of resources or the choice of the wrong forms of communication (see Table 1).

Another implication for macro-level accounts on legitimacy refers to the upcoming challenge for organizations in relation to social and ecological demands on business behavior (Bansal, 2003; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Especially in terms of pressures on the social responsibility of corporations and their reactions to these, the literature emphasizes structural solutions on the organizational level and neglects the role of (leadership) processes therein (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Legitimacy can be regarded as one of the main targets for as well as outcomes of successful engagements in CSR. As such, this article may help explain the role of leadership in legitimizing organizational conduct by facilitating an organization's social and ecological engagements. For example, can the commitment of the

CEO to promote issues of CSR be seen as an important trigger for internal as well as external sensemaking processes in relation to organizational legitimacy (Waldman et al., 2006). The framework may add details to the resources and rhetoric needed for such a successful strategic approach to CSR.

Meso level and organizational discourse analysis. By identifying the relevant aspects at each level of analysis (e.g., the legitimization strategies, the discursive influence tactics, the resources of leaders, and role of communication), the proposed framework offers future empirical research drawing on organizational discourse analysis reference points for further investigations. In addition, although research on leader sensegiving has focused on organizational change as a trigger for sensegiving processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 77), this paper further emphasizes that legitimacy pressures and divergent stakeholder demands may also trigger processes of sensegiving and the management of meaning.

Furthermore, we offer an additional conceptual discussion on influence tactics (Vaara & Tienari, 2008). The rhetorical tactics of influencing legitimacy discourses are predominantly discussed empirically, creating the need to adjust or amend them according to the empirical accounts at hand (see e.g., Vaara & Monin, 2010). A conceptual approach of identifying authorization, rationalization, and moral reasoning as generic influence tactics for specific types of legitimacy helps associate each of these tactics with the corresponding favorable resources and outcomes (see Table 1).

Finally, empirical accounts relying on organizational discourse analysis focus predominantly on texts and their impact (Fairclough, 1995). Although this research takes into account micro-processes and their effect on broader discourses, it is missing the reference to leadership, its resources, and its potential for influencing these discourses. Depicting leadership as a process that can influence discourses can help shed light into why some issues become salient. Even if discursive research identifies the main actors that shape discourses, it often relates their prominence to the rhetoric of what was said. We think this places insufficient emphasis on the underlying factors of individual agents favorably influencing the discourse, i.e., their habitus and capital (Bordieu, 1977). As such, empirical research could take into account additional data sources about the background of persons demonstrating leadership in legitimacy discourses. Analyzing the process of an active management of meaning by the interplay of the resources and forms of communication of focal agents (e.g., their education; access to capital; verbal, written, and symbolic accounts; their influence tactics) accounts for the complexity and hopefully a more detailed account of the legitimization process.

Micro level and leadership theory. The discussed discursive perspective on leadership (Fairhurst, 2009) offers an important additional approach to leadership apart from the dominant psychological research paradigm (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2006). It allows for different methods to be used and can more easily and clearly link levels of analysis than quantitative, psychological research.

The management of meaning highlights the process character of leadership and emphasizes the important role of communication in today's business environment. The emphasis on the process of leadership is a central issue in many standard definitions of leadership (Bass, 1990; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2006), yet it is overlooked when focusing on quantitative empirical research agendas that are often restricted to observations at one point in time. Bringing communication and language back to leadership research helps more clearly identify how and through which means leaders influence others and adds temporal dimensions as discourses evolve over time. This paper summarizes the sources of influence with which leadership can be associated and upon which leaders can draw—namely, their capital and habitus as well as the possible forms of communication. This may enhance again the awareness of additional sources of influence apart from dominant accounts on inspirational and charismatic aspects of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

Our framework also depicts leaders as gate-keepers and sensegivers of environmental cues to organizational legitimacy, amplifying the call for a stakeholder model of leadership (Schneider, 2002). An evolving research stream on responsible leadership (Doh & Stumpf, 2005; Pless, Maak, & de Jongh, 2011; Waldman & Siegel, 2008) might benefit from the presented framework. Responsible leadership research explicitly recognizes the challenges of globalization for leadership and broadens the understanding of leadership from the leader–follower relationship toward inclusive leader–stakeholder interactions (Voegtlin et al., 2012). It thereby offers an interesting approach to answer the challenges of gaining moral legitimacy. However, the link between responsible leadership and legitimacy still has to be made clear. This paper can assist such efforts, especially through the heuristic approach leading toward moral legitimacy.

Taken together, we hope this article provides a starting point for linking the fields of legitimacy, discourse analysis, and leadership more closely and spurs future research in this direction.

Future research directions and managerial implications

The theoretical model was designed to encourage future research. Further theoretical considerations could investigate each of the steps of Figure 1 and Table 1 in more detail, for example by searching for mechanisms of how a specific leadership resource can be used to facilitate a specific discursive tactic. Empirical research can use the framework as guidance for analyzing legitimization struggles in organizations, focusing in particular on the role of leadership and its resources.

One of the most interesting future research opportunities would be empirically investigating the entire legitimization process, which would include identifying individual actors or a team of relevant actors in an organization who exert leadership by shaping the meaning around an issue. This issue should be connected to legitimacy pressure from the external organizational environment. Related questions would include: How is the threat to legitimacy perceived? What are the sensemaking processes within the team/organization? What is the reaction or organizational agents in terms of communicative engagement in legitimizing organizational conduct? What are the effects of sensegiving (i.e., the active management of meaning) on the discourse? What forms of capital do actors employ? What is their background (habitus)? Is there a strategy (this may be an implicit one) identifiable? How does the legitimating audience (e.g., the relevant stakeholder groups, including other parts of the organization) react to the efforts of legitimizing organizational conduct? The analyses of legitimization processes can also be investigated within the organization by examining legitimization pressures on subsidiaries of a firm, internal departments, or even teams.

The framework may also help explain why legitimization fails, such as by identifying the steps in the legitimization process that contributed to or even caused the failure, in order to address the discourse in a convincing manner. Areas to explore include whether individual agents had the resources to shape the discourses, the management of meaning around the issues affected the audiences, and the chosen forms of communication (i.e., the texts issued) were effective.

Finally, the heuristic framework emphasizes neglected, yet important, ways to approach and empirically examine leadership in organizations (see also, Fairhurst, 2009). Scholars could try to identify aspects of the habitus or capital of leaders that may facilitate the management of meaning (e.g., leaders' education, specific characteristics, access to organizational capital, social network and communicative abilities) or investigate more thoroughly how charismatic or inspirational forms of leadership are able to shape meaning and affect discourses (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 2003; Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Furthermore, how these aspects relate to sensegiving and the production of texts that shape discourses could be empirically examined.

As the presented framework was primarily designed to inform theory and offer research directions, the managerial implications that we can offer are more of a general nature. The model could be used to sensitize management for processes of legitimacy and provide managers with an idea of what resources they may be able to employ and how they may shape discourses around legitimacy. Such information may raise awareness and highlight the importance of communication in leadership, trigger leaders' sensemaking and illustrate the complexity of discourses while simultaneously pointing out ways to actively influence such discourses.

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FIGURE 1

Legitimacy across Levels of Analysis

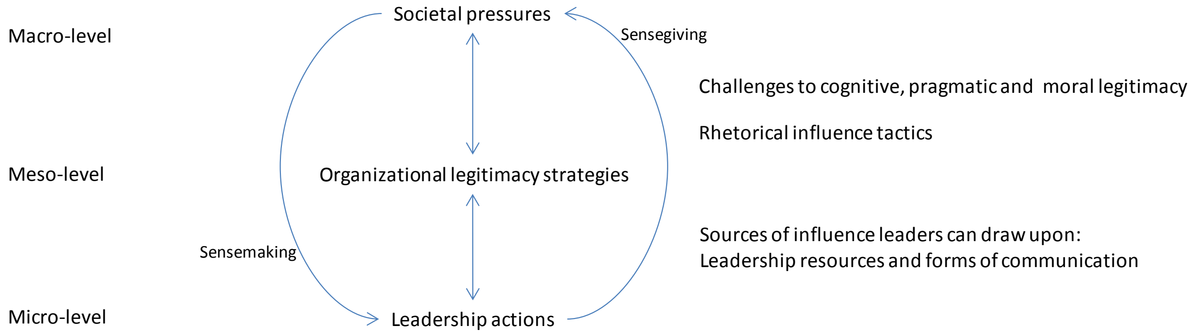

TABLE 1

The Legitimization Process

Type of legitimacy	**Cognitive legitimacy**	**Pragmatic legitimacy**	**Moral legitimacy**
Societal pressure	Consistent	Inconsistent	Inconsistent
Costs of organizational change	Low	High	Low-high
Legitimization strategies	Isomorphic adaption	Strategic manipulation	Moral reasoning
Rhetorical influence tactics	Authorization	Rationalization	Moral evaluation
Leadership: Resources			
Capital most prevalent	Bureaucratic and organizational	Financial and technological	Social and informational
Advantageous habitus	Grown up in society of interest	Social network with key stakeholders	Communication and rhetorical skills, open and ethical mindset
Leadership: Dominant forms of communication	Monologic, cooperative, symbolic	Monologic, assertive, written	Dialogic, cooperative, verbal

[i] These are often referred to as rhetorical or discursive strategies. However, we use the term *tactic* to avoid the idea that they are conflated with the legitimization strategies and to imply that they are more directly open to manipulation by individual leadership action.

[ii] Other authors refer to different rhetorical legitimization strategies, such as distinguishing between ontological, historical, teleological, cosmological, or value-based theorizations as a rhetorical means to legitimize actions (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

[iii] With regard to this, we see mythopoesis as partly contained within the other tactics, e.g., in authorization when narratives are used to relate the issue to the past in forms of customs or traditions or in moral evaluation when drawing on parables connecting to the future.